NWCT Arts Council

Automation Lab - Pilot Project
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Theory of Change / Why This Matters Now

Our goal is to reduce the increasing **AI capabilities overhang*** by democratizing the capabilities of advanced AI tools through implemented, replicable automations that reduce administrative workload and strengthen shared infrastructure for arts & culture nonprofit organizations.

Long term, we aim to help close the widening access gap **to ensure that arts & culture nonprofits are not left behind** as technology advances.

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***The AI capabilities overhang** is the *gap between what today's AI tools can already do* and *what small nonprofits are actually able to adopt*.

In arts & culture nonprofits, the overhang is usually driven by practical constraints like limited staff time, low technical experience, risk/privacy concerns, and lack of clear workflows. The result is that **advanced AI capabilities exist (and are improving quickly), but those factors cause implementation speed to lag behind**, so value remains inequitable and inaccessible.

Our Vision for Impact

Our vision is that cultural nonprofit organizations are able to operate more sustainably by spending less staff time on repetitive administrative work and more time on mission-driven activities, without reducing staff roles or undermining organizational values.

The Problem

AI tools are increasingly amazing, but most nonprofit leaders do not have the capacity or technical background to leverage these tools for organizational development.

Many nonprofit organizations face a mismatch between expectations and capacity. Administrative responsibilities related to compliance, reporting, fundraising, communications, and data management have grown steadily, while staffing levels, technical support, and unrestricted funding have remained constrained.

As a result:

- Staff and leadership spend excessive time on low-leverage administrative tasks
- Operational knowledge becomes siloed or undocumented
- Burnout and turnover increase institutional fragility
- Organizations struggle to adapt to changing community needs

While automation and AI-enabled tools are increasingly accessible, most small nonprofits are not well positioned to experiment safely. They often lack the time, internal expertise, and margin for error required to test new approaches without risking disruption.

Why This Problem Persists

This problem is not primarily caused by a lack of capable staff or leadership. It persists because:

- In many small nonprofits, administrative workflows evolve in response to changing demands rather than intentional design. As a result, processes become increasingly complex over time, with limited opportunities to review, simplify, or realign them with current needs and capacity.
- There is little applied, nonprofit-specific evidence about what forms of automation are effective, appropriate, or harmful.
- The risks of experimentation fall disproportionately on small organizations with the least capacity to absorb failure.

Without shared learning infrastructure, each organization is left to navigate automation decisions alone.

The Intervention

This project supports a small number of cultural nonprofit organizations through narrowly scoped, time-bounded automation pilots focused on specific administrative workflows.

Each pilot:

- Targets a clearly defined operational bottleneck
- Applies responsible, human-centered automation principles
- Is implemented within existing systems and constraints
- Is evaluated for effectiveness, limitations, and unintended consequences
- Is fully documented for external learning

The project functions as applied research rather than service delivery, prioritizing learning and transferability over optimization.

Key Assumptions

This theory of change rests on the following assumptions:

- A meaningful portion of nonprofit administrative burden is reducible through workflow-level automation.
- Small, well-scoped pilots are safer and more informative than large-scale implementations.
- Transparency and documentation increase trust and replicability.
- Staff involvement in design and evaluation improves outcomes.
- Knowledge generated through real-world testing is more useful than abstract advice that is not grounded in day-to-day nonprofit operations.

These assumptions are tested and refined through each pilot.

Potential Risks

- Projects see scope creep as organizations develop understanding of their needs.
- Automation makes processes *less* transparent to staff, creating workflow complications.
- Reliance on automation tools resulting in lost institution knowledge of manual processes.
- Technical debt being created if programs require ongoing technical support, such as assistance in the case of API deprecation, etc.
- Staff may feel anxious about automation or perceive it as a threat to job security or autonomy.
- Staff frustration or confusion during testing and iteration.
- Actual staff reduction.

These risks are defined now so that processes are designed with risk mitigation as a critical component.

Causal Pathway

If nonprofit organizations participate in carefully scoped automation pilots focused on real administrative workflows,

and if those pilots are designed with explicit ethical and operational guardrails,

and if implementation decisions, outcomes, and constraints are documented and shared,

then nonprofits will gain credible, low-risk examples of how automation can reduce administrative burden,

which enables organizations to reclaim staff time, improve operational resilience, and make more informed technology decisions.

Outputs

The project produces:

- Sector-wide survey results and analysis
- Decision-making frameworks for assessing automation readiness
- Detailed case documentation of automation pilots, standardized reporting metrics
- Evidence of both successful and unsuccessful approaches
- Clear guidance on when automation is and is not appropriate
- Reusable frameworks, templates, and documentation
- Prioritized recommendations for next-phase funding or expansion

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Outcomes

Near-Term Outcomes

- Reduced time spent on targeted administrative tasks
- Increased staff understanding of automation capabilities and limits
- Improved consistency and reliability of administrative processes

Longer-Term Outcomes

- Stronger organizational capacity and stability
- Greater ability to plan, evaluate, and adapt programs
- A shared evidence base to guide responsible automation adoption across the nonprofit sector
- A framework that continues to evolve and allow cultural nonprofits to keep pace with advances in technology

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Why This Matters Now

Automation technologies are advancing quickly, but sector-specific guidance has not kept pace. In the absence of applied research, nonprofit organizations face a false choice between premature adoption and complete avoidance.

This project intervenes at a moment when experimentation is both technically feasible and institutionally risky. By generating practical evidence grounded in real nonprofit environments, the initiative helps the sector navigate technological change deliberately, responsibly, and in alignment with their missions.

What Success Looks Like

Success is not defined by scale or speed of adoption. It is defined by whether nonprofit organizations gain:

- Clearer understanding of where automation is appropriate
- Practical tools and documentation they can adapt with confidence
- Reduced administrative burden without staff displacement
- Increased staff time that is dedicated to mission-driven work

This theory of change guides project design, evaluation, and communication throughout the pilot phase and informs decisions about future expansion.